MEETINGS AND SPEECHES

As it had been a decade earlier, political life in Petrograd was marked by meetings and speeches. Along with other tasks, my duty was to present the views of the Executive Committee to crowds in concert halls and theaters, military barracks and factories.

The meetings in the theaters and concert halls were usually organized by the Cadets, largely for anti-Soviet progaganda. However, the prestige of the Petrograd Soviet was so strong that the audience would be disappointed if no Soviet speaker appeared on the scene. Here politics was mixed with entertainment. It seemed absurd to me to be sandwiched into a program between a tenor in a dinner jacket and a glamorous soprano, but that was the style of the time. The star of the concert-hall meetings was Kerensky. Occasionally the front row showered him with flowers; he would pick up red roses, press them to his heart, and throw them back to the public. This also was part of the style of the time.

The meetings in barracks were restrained and sometimes outwardly dull, but they had a tragic undertone for me. Their purpose was political education. The soldiers—sometimes three thousand men or more—seemed friendly, even sentimental, but I often felt a wall between them and myself. The first words of the speaker, usually greeting the listeners in the name of the Executive Committee of the Soviet, invariably got noisy applause. But the questions of the audience after the speaker's address often revealed the hidden discontent among the troops: "When will the war end?" "Why should we reinforce the front now that the Soviet has offered peace to all peoples?" "Why do the officers who opposed the revolution remain in command?" "Why should we carry on drill training?"

Order and discipline among the troops were maintained by regimental committees elected during the first days of the revolution and manned by those who first grasped the situation and could explain it to their comrades. Often these were intellectuals—army clerks, pharmacists, and volunteers who had joined the army for patriotic reasons, most of them excellent people with a sense of responsibility for the morale and fighting spirit of the army. They were the bulwark of order in the new army, and I was surprised to discover that officers looked upon them with suspicion and poorly hidden hostility.

The factory meetings were different. The Soviet representatives usually shared the platform with spokesmen of the leftist opposition. The latter did not attack the Soviet directly. Rather, they "deplored"